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Plot against the pope

Tonight at 10 p.m., the NBC Television Network will come very close to accusing Leonid Brezhnev of masterminding the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II. The TV documentary, "The Man Who Shot the Pope: A Study in Terrorism," is based on a nine-month investigation that has turned up persuasive circumstantial evidence to support the charge.

A similar accusation is found in the current issue of Reader's Digest in an article entitled "The Plot to Murder the Pope."

Actually, the Reader's Digest piece is one of those "He knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody" conspiracy stories, the kind of daisy chain that fatigued so many people trying to make sense of the John F. Kennedy assassination. Author Claire Sterling says that Mehmet Ali Agca, the pope's assailant, had associated with a man, who had contact with another man, who is associated with the Bulgarian government, which is subservient to the Soviet Union. So the Russians shot the pope. That thesis would find rough going in a court of law. Nevertheless, the article does amass enough evidence to indicate that somebody powerful was teleguiding Agca, probably someone in Bulgaria.

The NBC documentary also traces Agca to Bulgaria and, by implication, to the Soviet secret police. But NBC goes Reader's Digest a step further by establishing a motive for the Soviets. The TV report says that in 1980, in a handwritten letter, the pope told Brezhnev that if the Soviets invaded Poland he would abdicate the papacy and return to his country to lead the resistance. The attempted assassination, the network suggests, was in preparation for Soviet moves against Poland's Solidarity union.

Whether true or not, these serious charges — along with the strong evidence that the Soviet Union has been using biological poisons in its so-called pacification of both Laos and Afghanistan — will surely make many Americans wonder if it is possible for us to deal with such people.

The situation is somewhat analogous to Soviet concerns about the American C.I.A.'s activities in overthrowing the governments of Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s, and in collaborating with underworld figures in an effort to murder Fidel Castro in the early 1960s. Governments sometimes engage in very shameful behavior, indeed.

But the United States and the Soviet Union must eventually surmount their mutual suspicions — founded or unfounded — and come to terms with each other. Given the fact of nuclear weaponry, the alternative is unacceptable.

As a first step toward such understanding, it would be wise if the espionage agencies of both governments would desist from the kind of terrorist activity outlined in tonight's TV documentary.